

## Chapter 23

# Communal/Personal Balance

### The Shift from Individualistic Overemphasis to Communal/Personal Balance (from Being Apart to Being a Part)

Individualistic overemphasis is a primary flaw in the cultural patterns of contemporary industrial society. We humans are indeed individual beings, but we are also parts of whole communities, whole regions, whole continents, and indeed the whole planet. We are enmeshed in the being of the cosmos. We are members of a specific human society. In a wholesome society the dignity of the solitary person is balanced with a strong emphasis on communal participation and responsibility. This latter emphasis has decayed in modern times. We who are the members of modern industrial societies have overemphasized the individual and warped the solitary-communal balance that a good society requires. This will be the thesis of this chapter plus some reflection on what we can do to restore the balance through a fresh and appropriate emphasis on community.

### The Objective Facts

Our love affair with the private automobile is a simple example of our overemphasis on the individual person. The ability to jump into our private car and go anywhere at any time of day is something that most of us treasure. In many places a car has become necessary, for we have minimized or phased out most of our public transportation options. We have often separated our housing from our work places and shopping centers to such an extent that private cars seem the only viable means of getting where we need to go. Many people in rural areas are spending hours each day driving to urban work. Many people in urban areas are sitting hours each day in traffic congestions. On many days in many locations our vehicles fill the air with fumes so vile that breathing becomes difficult and dangerous to our health. Yet few of us blame our privately owned car for these difficulties. Perhaps we blame other cars and, of course, trucks. Or perhaps we blame some nebulous other – some government or economic something. We may not notice that these social structures have been constructed to serve our individualism. And our individualism is now promoted by these social structures. Often, we do not want to notice that changing these structures means a shift in our individualistic overemphasis.

When proposals are made to solve the problems of pollution and congestion with public transportation systems, many of us are opposed. Many of us are averse to traveling with people we don't know and some of whom, we imagine, might be dangerous. Furthermore, we would have to go when the trains and buses go, and that may not be exactly when we want to go. We feel some loss of control of our comings and goings. Some of us feel almost humiliated or naked when we don't have our bodies surrounded by our pickup, our SUV, our fancy sports car, or at least our quite practical, energy-efficient, air-conditioned compact.

Even if we know that a public transportation system could be made convenient and safe, we are not sure we want it. We may realize that sitting for an hour reading our newspaper or novel might be more pleasant than sitting in traffic burning our gasoline and breathing fumes. We may even realize that a good train could move us to work with an energy efficiency that might be expressed as something like a 1000 miles per gallon. We might even become intrigued with the idea of developing friendships and conversations with our fellow commuters. Nevertheless, these are changes many of us do not want. Many of us feel almost allergic to other people; we prefer the privacy and independence of our private cars.

Furthermore, we don't trust whoever might be managing our public transportation systems. We are not sure these public bodies will have our best interests at heart or provide proper protections for us. We often see governmental agencies as alien beings rather than our own democratic selves acting in our own behalf. Indeed, many of us have given up on democracy. We seldom experience situations in which we get to express our views and have them make a difference in the way things get done.

So we retreat to our individualism; we abandon our public institutions to be run by the rich, the powerful, and the greedy. In large numbers we have withdrawn from public affairs and left the public playing field to those who profit from it. Too few of us still have the stomach for public meetings, for thoroughgoing communal responsibility, or for the perpetually fighting for this or that needed change to make our common society workable. So we prefer the style of "leave me alone" to the style of "being a part."

How did this style of individualistic overemphasis come about? The United States and the rest of the modern world was formed by "*industrialism* as a technology, *capitalism* as a way of organizing it, and *democracy* as a way of running both." (Max Lerner) All three of these movements were movements that affirmed the creativity and rights of the individual person over against the collectivism of the Middle Ages. Industrialism encouraged the innovator and the inventor. Capitalism encouraged competition among individual players. Democracy was an empowerment of the individual voter over against the monarchical ordering of the past. Two hundred years ago, these three thrusts were creative. Combined together these thrusts released individual creativity from its medieval shackles and made progressive society a possibility.

Nevertheless, it came to pass over the centuries that these individual-emphasizing thrusts wiped out almost all geographically based community, isolated the individual person from meaningful relations with the whole, and encouraged huge business organizations to do whatever they individualistically pleased. Corporation managers and investors consider themselves noble and creative in doing whatever they please, and many of them do what they please without regard for the whole planet or for whole societies. Today individualism, not collectivism, is our primary imbalance. Some socialist and communist movements set out to reinstate communal experience and responsibility, but these movements typically resulted in dictatorial forms of collectivism ruled by individualistic tyrants. Classical communism collapsed or is collapsing from the nonfunctional weight of its top-heavy collectivism ruled by individualistic dictators. In the United States, an ultraconservative political administration is working to establish what we might characterize as a rigid collectivism in which individualism is emphasized.

Strange as this might seem to ideologies on both the left and the right, it turns out that individualism and collectivism are two sides of the same malfunctioning society. Our challenge is to find the proper balance between individual creativity and social responsibility, between human rights and public order, between the singular person and the natural planet.

Returning to the US public transportation example, urban public transportation has developed slowly and interurban rail transportation has been in decline for many years. Finding a larger place for them in our lives is being opposed by rich and powerful people who are concerned with the profits of our automobile, truck, and airplane companies. Oil companies are also typically unsympathetic with reducing the number of highway vehicles or with cleaning up our air. The companies who are invested in these established transportation and energy systems will have to embrace "negative growth" when "we the people" insist upon a transportation system that is more public and more energy efficient.

But “we the people” are reluctant to oppose the rampant individualism practiced by the leaders of our large corporations because we are still addicted to our own individualism. Most of us have accepted the myth that human society is (or should be) a big competitive game where those who work the hardest and the cleverest win the prizes, and those who don’t simply get left behind. So we think that a business leader should go for the gold, seek first place, expand, grow, and be left alone to follow his or her own inclinations. We want to do that ourselves, so why should our business leaders be restrained? We want to win our place in the prosperity spectrum, and we want that place to be the result of our own effort and cleverness. We want to believe that each of us is a separate individual competing with other separate individuals. Indeed, many of us consent to cooperate with other people only as a sort of compromise of our treasured individualism. Typically, we don’t favor social solutions that require us to reconsider our individualistic styles of life.

We even damage our life as individuals when we overlook the simple fact that we humans are all one species of life using the resources of one finite planet. We are being forced by the times in which we live to notice that the health issues of any part of humanity threaten the health of us all. We are being forced to notice that the starvation, desperation, and insecurity of over half of the human population is a security problem for all of us. We are being forced to notice that the Earth is a finite system. We are being forced to notice that if people everywhere were to achieve the per capita Earth-use levels enjoyed by US citizens, that would require three or more additional planets.

But our cultural mindset tells us that as long as we, in our individual life or individual family, are getting along fairly well, we can overlook the fact that our planet-wide economic, cultural, and political systems are simply not working, or not working well enough. They are certainly not working for billions of people. And additional billions are being added to that group for whom planet-wide society is not working. In less than a hundred years, all of us may be added to that group for whom human society is not working.

So what is it exactly that is not working? If “capitalism” only meant innovative technology, creative enterprise, and a market system, capitalism would be no problem. All those things can be part of our future. And if “socialism” only meant having publicly owned institutions managing crucial parts of our common life, socialism would be no problem. But real world socialism and real world capitalism are both a problem because each is run by individualistic economic elites in a topdown fashion, and these elites fight to the death against any and all expressions of genuine representative democracy. In the United States we the people no longer rule our so-called democratic societies. We the people have been reduced to individualistic consumers seeking individualistic jobs in whatever slots are offered us by a society constructed and controlled by an individualistic economic elite. Roughly stated, these are the facts of our times with regard to individualism and community.

## **The Spirit Challenge**

So we face the Spirit challenge of overcoming our own individualism in order to displace the individualistic tyrants who are making the planet an unworkable home for us all. We know that these tyrants are not going to willingly give up their places of individualistic privilege and power. So we the people need to do something that may seem unthinkable to our individualistic minds. We need to get together and work together and persist together to throw the tyrants out. We have to work with one another. We need to learn how to listen to the truth that each person might bring to the table. We need to patiently bear with the confusions that each of us bring to a common meeting. In a word, we need to give up our individualism and become the communal beings that we actually are. We are communal beings in our created

human essence, but we as members of modern industrial cultures are deeply estranged from that essence. And we will not recover our communal essence without some dedication to doing so.

Many of us think of Spirit as a completely solitary matter. And while it is true that Spirit resides in the solitary depths of singular persons, Spirit is also a connecting matrix that joins us with others. We are in our essential being communal, and our Spirit life is not an escape from that communal quality but an entry into the full depths of it. As we probe ever more fully into our own inner being, we discover ever more deeply our capacity for and our rootedness in community with others. Almost every Spirit tradition has a saying close to this one: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." This teaching does not say don't love yourself or don't be a self. It assumes that love of self and love of neighbor are threads of one cloth. In fact, if we do not love ourselves with a deep and forgiving and ever challenging love, we cannot love our neighbor in the deep ways that our neighbor needs. This is not sentimentality. This is not codependency. This is not denying that we are quite often irritated, offended, and hostile toward other people. But these sometimes disagreeable other members of our planetary existence are parts of a common humanity that we must love in order to fully love ourselves. A full Spirit realization means realizing that loving the Overall Reality that we may call "God" and loving self and neighbor is one overall quality of Spirit. This Spirit of universal compassion is our true nature, our human essence. We are not ourselves and do not love ourselves without this compassion for all.

From this perspective individualistic overemphasis is a form of estrangement from our true nature. When Christians or Buddhists, who understand their own tradition, speak of dying to self or becoming a no-self they do not mean giving up being a singular being; they mean transcending the egoism that is manifest in our individualistic overemphasis. Each of us and the cultural forms of society as a whole need to overcome individualistic overemphasis in order to move forward appropriately.

## **The Needed Consensus**

The depth of our individualism is reflected in the individualistic ways we seek to overcome the overall problems created by that individualism. For example, many of us have made a ritual of recycling. We faithfully try to do something useful with everything we throw away. This is a good ritual for stating our dedication to an ecologically sane future, and we are indeed being a good example for others. Nevertheless, it is not enough for us to inspire individual persons to recycle, or insulate houses, to save water, or the 101 other personal practices. Even if millions of us do most of these individual ecological practices it does not resolve our ecological crises. There is no alternative to working together, if real solutions are to be realized. There is no alternative to recovering democratic processes, establishing democratically responsive decision makers, and cooperating with other nations and regions on a planet-wide basis.

Even effective recycling requires working together to make recycling more convenient for more people and to assure that these products are indeed recycled rather than just dumped. Indeed, we need appropriate laws and customs that require recycling to be fastidiously done by everyone. Similar principles apply to insulating our houses, conserving water, and hundreds of other things. Nothing we do completely on our own makes enough difference to significantly change the patterns of oppression that our individualism has created and is still supporting.

The forces of individualism have to be opposed by vast movements of people who are democratically deciding what is best for our future and then building the unity and the clout necessary to actually make these agreed upon choices happen.

The global justice movement, sometimes called by its enemies “the anti-globalization movement,” is an emerging planet-wide diverse assemblage of groups and individuals focused on overcoming the rulership of the transnational corporations. Just as the civil rights movement of the 1960s was a center-stage movement in the United States at that time, so the global justice movement is a center-stage movement for the entire planet in these opening years of the third millennium. The global justice movement calls to each of us to give this common thrust some of our individual strength. And this movement will not rob us of our personal worth. It will indeed give us the privilege of making a maximum contribution to our times.

So how do we join up? This is a complex question because there are so many diverse elements that compose this complex movement of people. Some are focusing on the restructuring of democracy. Others are protecting and restoring the natural environment. Others focus on specific economic maladies. There are groups protesting or boycotting prominent horrors. There are groups creating new information systems. There are groups dealing with educational needs. And there are groups working to transfigure those religions that protect their individualistic members from the common truth of our times.

Each of us has to find our own place or perhaps organize a place for ourselves with those other persons with whom we are willing to work on the needs we feel called to fill. But however individual this calling may be, it is not a calling to do our own individualistic thing. It is a calling to be part of an awakening humanity working as a team to defeat the well-established ruts of individualism that have been structured into our social systems.

This then is the consensus we need to build: human fulfillment means being **a part** of things. Our coming **apart** into our own private escapes from the traumas of our times is part of the trauma of our times. Overcoming that trauma includes overcoming our individualistic overemphasis.